



“CULTURAL DISTRICTS”

Part one of a research study into
“Italian museums and cultural districts:
strengths and weaknesses”

National interest
October 2011

Conducted by *Fondazione Cariplo*
for Aspen Institute Italia

1. Preliminary remarks

In the Italian region of Lombardy, Fondazione Cariplo is active in a number of different sectors, including that of Arts and Culture: based on an assessment of the needs of the industry, Fondazione Cariplo has sought to arrive at solutions that pilot innovative initiatives.

The main issues identified as confronting the sector are:

- * difficulty in putting into operation consistent and coordinated expenditure mechanisms;
- * the amount of money required to be spent on extraordinary upkeep, due to the vastness of Italy's artistic heritage and its international significance;
- * the priority of interventions being determined by the need for urgent action rather than through planning;
- * a lack of strategic vision and comprehensive cultural policies;
- * fragmented ownership and responsibilities within the sector; and
- * poor linkages between the cultural sphere and local industry.

The first few points above reveal a problem relating to both the scarcity of resources and how they are employed.

The shortage of resources can be attributed to an underestimation of the role played by culture in society, which often stems from the difficulties of delivering results in terms of produced utility; this relates to the efficiency of spending mechanisms and the ability to produce significant outcomes.

In the face of such problems, one potential solution envisages the possibility of boosting the value generated by improving the expenditure process, even without increasing the amount of spending; another possible option is premised on the assertion that if the value generated were made more readily perceptible, it could produce a demonstrative effect capable of attracting further resources, both from public and private sources.

The other problem areas listed point to difficulties in formulating and, *a fortiori*, in implementing cultural policies capable of offering precise guidance and concrete responses to the complex issues facing the sector. The existence of extremely varied situations and the fragmentation of responsibilities, interests and the available resources of public and private actors make coordination and dialogue costly and often unproductive.

Hence, only with a clear and agreed action plan in place, which sets directions and priorities over the long term, as well as a process that engages and coordinates the various actors through ongoing incentives, is it possible to overcome the current sense of fragmentation and embark on more incisive measures.

On the basis of the problems identified and the possible solutions formulated, Fondazione Cariplo has developed a process capable of testing the validity of this approach at the local level.

The decision to settle on the local level as the appropriate starting point for a program aimed at improving the cultural sector stems from the observation that both the web of actors involved (including the administrative machinery, the manufacturing base, and community organizations), as well as that which it is sought to turn to better advantage (namely, the country's natural, historical and artistic heritage), clearly have a local dimension, which also happens to be one of Italy's great strengths and distinctive characteristics.

2. Cultural Districts and the approach to planning

The Cultural Districts co-funded by Fondazione Cariplo sustain the “cultural system” by strengthening local development processes.

The objectives of the initiative are:

- * to encourage the adoption of a long-term planning approach;
- * to promote integration and coordination between actors in the sector;
- * to enable dialogue between the cultural, administrative and production spheres;
- * to strengthen the focus on quality in decision-making processes; and
- * to plan for the sustainability of interventions.

The decision to work at a local level led to a concept floated in debate for several years, that of the “Cultural District”, being embraced and given real expression. It represents, theoretically, the most appropriate approach to meeting the challenge of integrated planning in the sector.

The cultural district draws its inspiration from the industrial district, a concept that arose to describe agglomerations of manufacturing firms that sprang up spontaneously and whose characteristics were later studied and theorized. Cultural districts, however, are of a profoundly different nature, since they do not emerge spontaneously, but are created through a process of planning. This distinction explains why, leaving aside the features that a district should ideally possess, the process and methods used to set up cultural districts already contain many of the determinants of the success or failure of the entire operation.

Fondazione Cariplo has therefore focused its efforts on the design of the process, whilst it has adopted a more open approach towards forms of organization and management as these have emerged.

3. The process

The process followed in the development of the Cultural Districts progressed through three stages:

** Phase 1 – Exploratory study*

Fondazione Cariplo commissioned the Milan Polytechnic to undertake a general pre-feasibility study throughout Lombardy, which established the key criteria and led to the identification of local areas suited to the development of cultural districts.

** Phase 2 - Operational feasibility studies*

From the pre-feasibility study, it became apparent that the areas identified for potential districts were in very different states of readiness from each other; at any rate, it seemed a necessary prerequisite to their actual establishment for accurate operational feasibility studies to be undertaken and for cohesive teams to be put together for each district. To this end, by means of a call for proposals, Fondazione Cariplo chose and co-funded a dozen proposals for operational feasibility studies. At the end of each funded study, the quality and actual feasibility was assessed, with those receiving a positive evaluation proceeding to Phase 3.

** Phase 3 - Establishment of Cultural Districts*

This phase involved the co-financing and establishment of those districts the proposals regarding which were assessed as presenting a sufficient state of readiness and feasibility. During this stage, Fondazione Cariplo played an important role in ensuring the achievement of the set objectives. Phase 3 led to the birth of the first districts in the Lombardy region within timeframes that varied from case to case.

4. The key innovative elements

The Cultural Districts initiative is the first and only one of its kind: an undertaking involving years of work in a number of local areas, with a view to establishing several districts spread across an entire region. The Cultural Districts made it possible:

1. To initiate and support development processes aimed at:
 - * instilling a long-term planning approach to preserving and capitalizing on cultural heritage;
 - * integrating cultural supply chains with local business supply chains; and
 - * creating a system for the management and development of activities that meets with the approval of key stakeholders.
2. To formulate and pilot a process by which local areas are motivated and guided to work towards establishing districts.

The first of these steps necessitated periodic contact between Fondazione Cariplo and the working groups (comprising administrators, managers and consultants) of every local area over the course of two years. At the same time, the supporting materials required for the preparation of operational feasibility studies were produced.

The second step envisaged the earmarking of funds for co-financing schemes, which for local areas represented:

- * an incentive to accept the challenge; and
- * a test of the real commitment of local partners called on to contribute to the funding of operations.

5. Evaluation criteria used

The assessment of operational feasibility studies focused on two aspects.

The first of these was the extent to which the feasibility study was able to grasp the real potential of establishing a cultural district in the local area in question. In this regard, the criteria of evaluation were: completeness, clearness, reliability and methodological consistency.

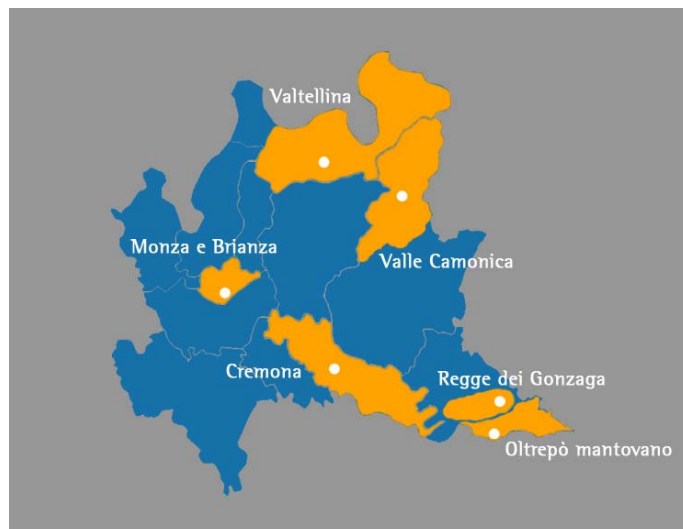
The second aspect considered was the quality of the particular district, that is, its capacity to provide compelling strategic responses to the objectives set.

Here, the evaluation criteria were as follows:

- * the ability to bolster, develop and diversify the cultural supply system vis-à-vis the opportunities presented by the local area;
- * the state of readiness of the proposed district, measurable by the willingness of local operators, administrators and entrepreneurs to commit themselves operationally and financially, as well as their ability to formulate a concerted and long-term work plan; and
- * the overall sustainability of the proposal, understood as the ability to imbue the initiative with long-term institutional legitimacy and financial and organizational stability.

Without question, one of the most difficult challenges for a cultural district is to succeed in identifying organizational solutions and to achieve a shared sense of utility that will ensure the sustainability of the partnership between public and private sector actors.

6. The Cultural Districts co-funded by Fondazione Cariplo and the stakeholders involved



The *Valcamonica Cultural District* invests in creative workshops for the design of innovative services to boost the area's cultural offerings, with a view to integrating them with local tourist offerings which are currently fragmented and pay little regard to the artistic and archaeological heritage of Valcamonica.

The lead agency is the Valcamonica Mountain Community; its partners are the Consorzio BIM, the Province of Brescia, local associations and foundations, as well as 42 Valcamonica municipalities.

Its three strategic objectives are:

- * to promote cultural enterprise and innovation;
- * to integrate culture, tourism and the local economic infrastructure; and
- * to preserve and capitalize on the area's artistic heritage.

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The *Oltrepò Mantovano Cultural District* invests in showcasing rural culture and the agro-food supply chain as factors contributing to the appreciation of the area's natural heritage and community endeavor. The district represents a further stride ahead for the culture of collaboration that characterizes the area and from which it draws its project-design strength.

The lead agency is the Consortium of Oltrepò Mantovano Municipalities; its partners are the local provincial authority, thirteen municipalities, the Milan Polytechnic, the local Agritourism Consortium, the local Chamber of Commerce, the local Employers' Association and the local library network.

Its three strategic objectives are:

- * to promote the emerging fine food network by integrating agritourism and gastronomic offerings with local agricultural infrastructure;
- * to foster new entrepreneurship in order to diversify the local production system; and
- * to showcase the identity and rural culture of an area heavily associated with early twentieth century Italian agriculture and industry.

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The *"Regge dei Gonzaga" Cultural District* draws on Gonzaga lore to promote the artistic identity and the emphasis on hospitality typical of Mantua and its surrounding areas. It invests in forging a network between institutions and enterprises which hinges on a fine food network and the preservation of cultural heritage being treated as strategic development priorities.

The lead agency is the Regge dei Gonzaga Association; its partners are the Municipality of Mantua, the local provincial authority and 12 other municipalities. The private sector is represented by the local Chamber of Commerce, the local Employers' Association, the Mantuan Agritourism Consortium, the Milan Polytechnic and local cultural organizations.

Its three strategic objectives are:

- * to furnish the cultural preservation system with innovative mechanisms and procedures that involve not only local authorities and universities, but also experts and businesses;
- * to develop a fine food, agro-food production, agritourism and catering network of excellence as a distinctive element of local identity; and
- * to integrate the activities centered on the Gonzaga palaces with the management plan for the Mantua and Sabbioneta UNESCO World Heritage Site.

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The *Brianza Cultural District* relies on local artistic heritage and culture as resources capable of stimulating the innovation and creativity of local businesses – an ambitious challenge, but one consistent with the entrepreneurial dynamism of the area.

The lead agency is the Province of Monza and Brianza; its partners are 5 municipalities, 4 industry associations and 3 training and research institutes.

Its three strategic objectives are:

- * to boost the area's identity and strengthen the role of the local provincial authority as a coordinator of cultural policies;
- * to promote quality processes in the preservation of artistic heritage, by integrating the activities of construction companies, local authorities and higher education institutions; and
- * to support the innovation and creativity of local businesses through the sharing of services and innovative training courses.

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The *Province of Cremona Cultural District* promotes the diversification of cultural supply and integration between performance, music and crafts as economic and social development priorities for the local area.

The lead agency is the Province of Cremona in partnership with all local organizations, which has seen initiatives set up from the outset with the local Chamber of Commerce, 8 municipalities, training institutions, musical foundations and cultural associations.

Its three strategic objectives are:

- * to boost the role of craft and music traditions as key facets of the local productive and artistic identity;
- * to establish and develop a Musical Tourism Exchange program as a showcase for local crafts; and
- * to expand the range of performances and training programs of excellence on offer in the fields of crafts and music.

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The *Cultural District of Valtellina* invests in the relationship between the area's landscape, local product specialities and cultural identity, focusing on area's historical mid-valley settlements and the traditional Rhaetian terraces that shape their surroundings.

The lead agency is the specially-created Local Development Foundation, of which the key local public and private actors are members. The district receives direct support from the Province of Sondrio, 3 mountain communities, 4 municipalities, local banks, A2A and other public and private organizations engaged in development of the area.

Its three strategic objectives are:

- * to preserve and capitalize on the terraced landscape of the Rhaetian slope as a distinctive feature of the historical identity of Valtellina;
- * to add value to local food and wine production through innovative technologies and the centralization of communications, marketing and management services; and
- * to promote awareness within local communities of the district's artistic and natural heritage, in order to diversify the area's tourist and cultural offerings.

7. Concluding remarks

In anticipation of an evaluation of its long-term impacts, some remarks may be made that might prove useful in replicating the "Cultural Districts" initiative:

1. The extent of co-financing from other public and private actors – around 45 million euro as compared to the 21 million euro granted by Fondazione Cariplo – confirms that cultural investment programs able to combine an expenditure plan with clear and shared objectives succeed in attracting new resources.
2. The outcome of the selection process – with 6 districts established from the initial 35 proposals received – demonstrates that this is an ambitious and complex undertaking; some tough decisions therefore need to be taken regarding the feasibility of proposals.
3. In addition, the formative process is a long one and must be based on sound ideas and a firm and stable institutional commitment. It is only the fulfillment of these conditions that has enabled the 6 cultural districts to survive the political changes and financial crises of recent years.
4. The transition from the planning to the implementation phase is critical and must be adequately overseen. Fondazione Cariplo's involvement during this stage has been much greater than in previous phases: appropriate monitoring mechanisms are essential in order to ensure that quality remains a prime objective for the districts in implementing their initiatives.